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ABSTRACT

Preparing the individual for the future is the ultimate goal of education. However, this goal is increasingly unmet as education becomes fragmented into disciplines which divide learning into a collection of unrelated situations. One solution to this fragmented learning is an interdisciplinary approach which is characterized by a concern for individual growth and the capacity to look at learning as a process. Three skills needed for future competence are creativity, reasoning, and decision making. An example of how creative decision making has been applied in a classroom setting is the nondisciplinary futurology program at Milford Junior High School in Milford, Ohio. Five aspects of creative decision making in this program include the ability of students to (1) recognize the significance of a given situation; (2) arrive at a variety of alternative approaches to deal with the situation; (3) examine the potential effects of any choice or decision; (4) make a decision based on available information; and (5) accept responsibility for decisions. The attitude of students involved in the program has been highly favorable. Students have often commented that they enjoy the class because it permits them to study subjects in a new and interesting way. (Author/DB)

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The Future, As Process

Education has gradually become more and more organized, and as a result, more and more fragmented. A non-disciplinary approach such as the one at Milford Junior High School in Milford, Ohio, tries to re-unify learning by emphasizing creative decision-making skills in preparing students for the future.

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Education seems trendier than the skateboard. As we see more and more youngsters risking their lives and limbs again on these inanities, we concurrently are aware of more and more school boards and the communities they represent adopting curriculum projects avowing the need for "learning the basics," "being able to get a job," or "creating traditional schools." One aspect which curiously has not only been mentioned in this light, but also in terms of educational innovation is the move to interdisciplinary studies. We say curious because the traditionalists hearken back to the times when all students were taught all they needed to know by the omniscient schoolmaster. At the same time, liberal educators call for a move to interdisciplinary studies in an effort to produce the modern Jeffersonian man.

What exactly is it about the interdisciplinary approach that permits it to be attractive to most elements of the educational spectrum? First we need to gain perspective by looking at the development of specialization in education. As the venerable veterans accurately report, there was a time when a single teacher had the responsibility not only for several grade levels, but also for all of the learning for each student. History bears out the fact that most carried out their responsibilities successfully. As the numbers and diversity of students increased, the schools were expected by the public to provide more and varied services. This increased sophistication led to certain organizational developments. The predominant such development was the establishment of specialized departments around which the curriculum and staff could be structured. It should be noted that this move toward a more specialized structure,

paralleled by an increase and change in the role of the administrator, can be to some degree traced to the changes in society reflected in the move from an agricultural based society to urban industrialism. It might also be noted that these developments were initiated in the secondary schools where responsibility for occupational training was most immediate, and that these same changes have still not completely filtered to the elementary grades where one teacher is still primarily responsible for all the learning of a student within a grade level.

The next step in specialization at the secondary level was in a large part a result of the high school's self-imposed role as college preparer. High schools were no longer content to offer four years of English. Instead, they offered Introduction to English Literature, The Novel, Shakespeare, and Advanced Composition. Eventually such courses were further segmented into "quarter courses" or "mini-courses" such as 18th Century English Literature, Shakespeare's Tragedies, Faulkner and the South, or Creative Modern Short Story Writing. Eventually learning was reduced and/or fragmented to a series of nonsequential, self-sufficient units. The point is that these developments were primarily organizational in nature, and rarely considered the effects of such striated learning on the student. Students were quickly led to assume that learning - and thus life - was a collection of independent situations. And to what end? Teachers found that in their quest to concentrate on one aspect of knowledge, they and their students often lost light of the purpose of this knowledge. The end result was a system of public education

which is dominated by organizational concerns and in which the expressed goals of the total education of the student are in reality second to order.

With the growing concern both within and without the educational community about the quality of public education and its ability to educate children, the structure becomes an obvious target of attack. Teachers, students, and community complain about a seeming discontinuity between classes. They blame plunging test scores, decreasing abilities, and general incompetency on the system which encourages disconnected units of study. In their efforts to remedy this situation, they often reject the organizational elements but - consciously or unconsciously - retain the divisive thought patterns. One such "innovative" approach is team teaching which often is no more than the substitution of four teachers and one hundred students for one teacher per twenty-five students. The unfortunate reality is that the students are probably not receiving a significantly more coordinated education than before because the specialized teachers still teach their subject matter; it is just in a larger room with more students.

The one approach to education which completely rejects the traditional system of fragmentation is one which spurns all concepts of breaking learning into disciplines; i.e. the only truly successful interdisciplinary approach is one that is NONdisciplinary. The characteristics of a nondisciplinary approach are concern for individual growth and the capacity to look at learning as a process. These two characteristics imply that learning/knowledge is not stagnant. In fact, Alvin Toffler, in his book Future Shock (Bantam: 1971)

says that knowledge is exploding exponentially. Therefore it seems somewhat naive that any one person could master a given field. Unfortunately, much of the existing structure assumes just that. The value in a nondisciplinary approach is that the teachers are not forced to assume this mantle of expertise and infallibility about facts, but instead are expected to share their insights and experiences about learning. Rather, the teacher is encouraged to join the student in creating/sharing in the process of learning and in gaining access to knowledge. Carl Rogers calls the teacher in this role a facilitator.

The real problem for a facilitator in a nondisciplinary approach is to what end he facilitates growth. For a teacher in a traditional structure, the end is more apparent. He need only offer a given number of specific skills and/or facts toward an immediate objective. The nondisciplinary facilitator lacks these artificial units. He must consider all aspects of learning which can potentially affect the learner. This "burden" actually frees the facilitator to consider the purpose of education. A concern for an individual's growth implies the consideration of the student's future. In fact, most educators, if asked to generalize, would agree that preparing the individual for the future is the ultimate goal of education.

Thus far we have forcibly rejected any organizational structure. In a truly nondisciplinary approach, the basic consideration must be what will help the student prepare for the future. In this process

of preparing the student for the future, there are three skills which are important above all -- creativity, reasoning, and decision making; the abilities form the basis for all learning. These skills combine into a general process-oriented approach to problems: CREATIVE DECISION-MAKING. Creative decision-making is another name for what Toffler call "coping," or the ability to deal effectively with unfamiliar situations. Creative decision-making involves the following abilities:

- The ability to recognize the constitution and significance of a given situation;
- The ability to arrive at a variety of alternative approaches to dealing with the situation;
- The ability to examine the potential effects of any choice or decision;
- The ability to make a decision based on available information;
- The ability to accept responsibility for decisions.

An example of how creative decision-making can and has been applied in a classroom setting is the nondisciplinary Futurology program at Milford Junior High School in Milford, Ohio. Originally begun under a grant from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation in 1974, this program has attempted to develop the five aforementioned creative decision-making skills in freshman students in a class supplementary to the traditional curriculum. The program staff includes a math teacher, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, and two English teachers working together. The primary concern of the program is developing an awareness of, and a feeling for, one's personal involvement in creating the future through creative decision-making.

The title of the program - Futurology - should not be misconstrued, as it draws upon classical educational thinking as well as contemporary concerns. A primary aspect of the program is its emphasis on learning as a process, or experiential learning. The idea is that students learn best by doing. Thus, the students in the Futurology program are expected not only to read, research, and study, but also to get involved in learning situations. Student activities range from role-playing and simulation games, to visits to governmental agencies and future-oriented businesses, to participating in community development, regional planning and college life. The essence is that the student assumes an active, not passive, stance in learning about his role in the future. In this process, students are forced to examine their definition of education and learning and to enlarge it to encompass many experiences beyond the scope of the traditional departmental structure. A nondisciplinary approach permits us to help the students do this.

We make no claim to having arrived upon an earth-shattering discovery. What we offer is not designed as a panacea for specific problems, nor is it a complicated, contrived program which we are trying to sell. What we offer are merely some thoughts on the importance of seeing learning as a process, and as a means rather than as an end. Perhaps an interesting comment at this time would be that the students recognize the value of this type of program. Students have often commented to outsiders that they enjoyed the class because it permitted them to study things that they couldn't in other classes, in ways they couldn't normally participate

in other classes, and without fear of being out of line.

Our fondest hope is that at this point you are left with a profound sense of having read the obvious. Perhaps the thing which makes this program most worth comment is the coordination of three commonly accepted ideas:

- education only has value as it serves to prepare the student for the future;
- division of learning into artificially contrived areas leads to fragmentation; a more natural approach would be unified, or nondisciplinary;
- experience is the best teacher.

As we stated earlier, upon reflection, all education seems to share the common goal of preparing the student for the future, both those elements which are significant to the individual and those which involve his role in society. The best way to prepare a student for this future is certainly not to feed him volumes of facts which will soon be outdated, but to assist the student in gaining experiences which help him develop his abilities to cope with unfamiliar situations - his creative decision-making skills.